The AMERICAN INTEREST
http://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/05/19/sykes-picot-and-the-zionists/

Published on: May 19, 2016
THE MIDDLE EAST

Sykes-Picot and the Zionists

MARTIN KRAMER

Clearing up some misconceptions about Sykes-Picot on its centenary.

Many people presume that the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, which partitioned the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire between Britain and France, advanced the Zionist project in Palestine.

The Zionist movement celebrated Sir Mark Sykes as one of its own, so many have assumed that he must have designed the agreement to serve the Zionist interest. In the words of a Palestinian professor of history at Bir Zeit University in the West Bank, "Sykes-Picot was a carefully-designed plan and prelude to the Balfour Declaration. The creation of Israel on Palestinian land would not have been possible without the Sykes-Picot agreement." A former Israeli Ambassador has written that the Sykes-Picot agreement "politically and materially contribut[ed] to the realization of the Zionist vision." He has even suggested that its anniversary belongs on the same Zionist calendar with the anniversaries of the Balfour Declaration and the UN partition resolution of 1947, as "milestones on the path to Jewish statehood."

This is exactly wrong. In his memoirs, Chaim Weizmann, the Zionist leader who midwifed the Balfour Declaration, wrote of Sykes-Picot that it was "fatal to us.... The Sykes-Picot arrangement was not a full treaty; but it was sufficiently official to create the greatest single obstacle to our progress." Sykes-Picot wasn't a prelude to the Balfour Declaration, but an obstacle that had to be

cleared to reach the Balfour Declaration. To understand that, all one has to do is look carefully at the map.

But before that, a word on the purpose of Sykes-Picot. It was the Arab activist George Antonius who famously wrote of Sykes-Picot that it was "the product of greed at its worst." But it was a product of fear as much as of greed, if not more so. The fear was that in the aftermath of war, Britain and France, old rivals, would clash disastrously over the remnants of the Ottoman Empire. Sykes-Picot had the same logic as Yalta thirty years later: It proposed an orderly partition to keep wartime allies from plunging into a new conflict after victory. And a good case can be made that when it came to preventing clashes between two rivals, Sykes-Picot was much more effective than Yalta. Preserving the balance of power was its primary objective, and in that respect, Sykes-Picot achieved its purpose.

This fear of clashing allies is most manifest on the Sykes-Picot map in its treatment of Palestine. Sykes and Picot divided the Arab provinces of the empire by an east-west "line in the sand" across the Syrian desert. North of that line, there would be a "blue" zone of exclusive French control (including Beirut and Tripoli), and an Arab state (or states) under French protection (including Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, and Mosul). South of it, there would be a "red" zone of direct British control (including Basra and Baghdad), and an Arab state (or states) under British protection (mostly desert).

The first thing one notices is that Palestine doesn't fit neatly within the dualistic rubric of the French and British zones. This corner of the map is, in fact, divided *five* ways.

- A wedge in the north of the country, including the tributaries of the Jordan above the Sea of Galilee and part of the northern shore of the lake, are solid blue, that is, under direct French control.

- The eastern shore of the lake and the Golan are marked off as part of the Arab state under French protection.
- The bulk of the country, including Jerusalem, Jaffa, Nazareth, Tiberias, and Gaza, is colored brown. According to the agreement, "In the brown area there shall be established an international administration, the form of which is to be decided upon after consultation with Russia, and subsequently in consultation with the other Allies [the reference is to Italy], and the representatives of the Shereef of Mecca." (In an earlier joint memo in January 1916, Sykes and Picot wrote that "the chief of the Arabian confederation should have an equal voice in the administration of Palestine.") The notion was that this would be an Anglo-French condominium, with a yet-undetermined measure of input from other allies.
- The ports of Haifa and Acre, and the plain between them, are red, under direct British administration. Britain wanted this as an end point for a railroad from Baghdad to the Mediterranean.
- Last but not least, the south of the country, including Hebron and Beer Sheba, as well as Transjordan, are to be part of the independent Arab state or confederation of states under British protection.

The Sykes-Picot map thus constitutes the first partition plan for Palestine, into no fewer than five zones. Why so many pieces? Again, balance of power. Sykes had hoped to create a British-controlled land bridge from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean, but other Allied claims stood in the way. So the agreement regarding Palestine made concessions to the interests of almost every stakeholder: Britain, France, Russia, Italy, and the Sharif of Mecca.

Almost everyone: missing from the list were the Zionists. Twenty years later, George Antonius would call Sykes-Picot a "shocking document." It certainly shocked the Zionists in London in April 1917. That is when the British Zionist activist Harry Sacher got wind of it from a friendly journalist who picked up news of it from France. Sacher informed Chaim Weizmann, who was distressed to find that the agreement displayed not a single trace of consideration for Zionist aims. At this very time, Zionist leaders had been deep in discussion about Palestine with sympathetic British officials, including Sykes. Sachar wrote to Weizmann in disgust: "We have been lied to and deceived all along."

Weizmann was stunned by two aspects of the agreement. First, the Sykes-Picot partition thoroughly divided the Yishuv. Many of the most veteran Zionist settlements—Metullah, Rosh Pina, Yesod Hama'alah, Mishmar Hayarden—would be in the exclusively French zone, as would Safed. The internationalized brown zone would include Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Tiberias, as well as newer settlements such as Tel Aviv, Petah Tikvah, Rishon Lezion, Rehovot, and Zichron Yaakov. Weizmann called this division a "Solomon's judgment of the

worst character, the child is cut in two and both halves mutilated." Were Sykes-Picot implemented, he protested, "the Jewish colonizing effort of some thirty years [would be] annihilated."

Second, the agreement gave France a dominant role as far as the Jews were concerned. France would have full control of the Galilee settlements, and would be on equal par with Britain in Judaea and the coastal plain. Weizmann regarded France as wholly unsympathetic to Zionism; far from facilitating Zionist colonization, France would block it.

So what was he to do? Weizmann's immediate move was to show up at the Foreign Office and protest to Lord Robert Cecil, acting Foreign Secretary. Weizmann's report of that meeting is the most thorough Zionist critique of Sykes-Picot. Weizmann denounced the proposed division between the Galilee and Judaea in emphatic terms. "We would always consider [this] as an unjust partition," and the Galilee "would certainly constitute a Jewish irredenta…. There is little doubt that the suggested division of Palestine would raise an outcry which will ring through from one end of the world to the other." As for international or dual control, in the brown area, "it would be fraught with gravest dangers…. Any enterprise in the country would have to be sanctioned by both governments and would lead constantly to jealousies." According to Cecil, Weizmann even warned that "the Zionists throughout the world would regard a French administration in Palestine as… 'a third destruction of the Temple.'"

From April 1917, Weizmann devoted himself and his movement to overturning Sykes-Picot. The Zionists had one aim: to swap the Sykes-Picot partition plan for an exclusively British protectorate over the whole of Palestine. Only under a British protectorate, Weizmann rightly concluded, could the Jewish home project take root and flourish.

And Weizmann succeeded: in regard to Palestine, he managed to overturn Sykes-Picot entirely. Or was it really his success? In fact, he had plenty of powerful partners. By the time Weizmann learned of Sykes-Picot, many British officials wanted to shred it. They thought Sykes had given away far too much to the French. In particular, they didn't trust the French on the flank of the Suez canal, which was the imperial lifeline to India. And if the British and the ANZACs were going to do all the fighting and dying to liberate Palestine, why should Britain share it with anyone? As Lloyd George later wrote of the armies under Allenby: "The redemption of Palestine from the withering aggression of the Turk became like a pillar of flame to lead them on. The Sykes-Picot Agreement perished in its fire. It was not worth fighting for Canaan in order to condemn it to the fate of Agag and hew it in pieces before the Lord. Palestine, if recaptured, must be one and indivisible to renew its greatness as a living entity."

Sykes himself backtracked from the agreement, tried to get Picot to modify it, and helped formulate the Balfour Declaration. In 1919, the Zionist leader Nahum Sokolov wrote: "From the standpoint of Zionist interests in Palestine, [Sykes-Picot] justly met with severe criticism; but it was Sykes himself who criticized it most sharply and who with the change of circumstances dissociated himself from it entirely."

The Balfour Declaration was the crucial step in the unraveling the Palestine corner of the Sykes-Picot map. British military administration came next. The last nail in the coffin came in December 1918, when Lloyd George met Clemenceau in London. "Tell me what you want," said Clemenceau. "I want Mosul," said Lloyd George. "You shall have it. Anything else?" "Yes, I want Jerusalem too." "You shall have it." Exit France. Sykes-Picot formally and finally came undone when Britain received the exclusive mandate for all of Palestine. It is this exclusive British protectorate that eventually made Israel possible. Israel probably would never have been born, if the Sykes-Picot map had been implemented.

So Sykes-Picot became a dead letter as regards Palestine no later than 1918, if not earlier. Has it left any legacy at all? The Sykes-Picot map proclaimed that no one actor could unilaterally determine the fate of the country. There were too many conflicting interests. During the mandate years, Britain had enough power to call the shots alone. But only twenty years after Sykes-Picot, partition again became the solution to solving clashing interests in Palestine. So it has been from the Peel plan of 1937, to the UN partition plan of 1947, and ever since. The idea of agreed partition is the lasting legacy of Sykes-Picot. Even Israel's fifty-year control of the entire country from the Mediterranean sea to the Jordan river since 1967 hasn't undone it. Other aspects of Sykes-Picot disappeared completely. The idea of an agreed partition of Palestine, proposed in 1916 but never realized, is likely to remain with us for some time to come.

Martin Kramer is president of Shalem College in Jerusalem and the author of The War on Error: Israel, Islam, and the Middle East, forthcoming in October from Transaction. This essay is based on a presentation made to the conference on "100 Years Since the Sykes-Picot Agreement," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, May 18, 2016.